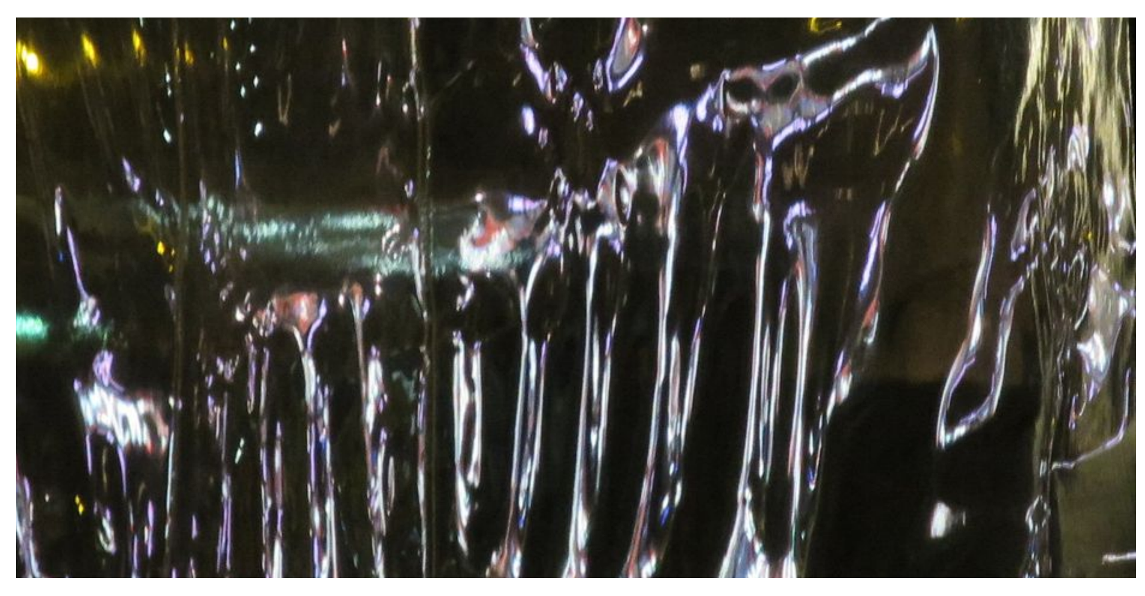
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ESTHER LESLIE 2018-05-01

FEAR EATS THE SOUL: WALTER BENJAMIN AND BAADER MEINHOF

NONPOLITICS BEWAFFNETER KAMPF, CLASS STRUGGLE, HATE, MAI 68, RAF, VIOLENCE, WALTER BENJAMIN

Neither of the figures in my title – Walter Benjamin and The Baader Meinhof Group – are in any direct way associated with 1968 – indeed each brackets it in time. The one, Benjamin, was long dead by the time of the student and worker revolts, that would undoubtedly have thrilled him, even if they did not thrill his old friend Adorno, who called in the police on his revolting students. Benjamin's adult thought emerges in the years of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and it reaches its final formulation in the dark days of Nazi rule, his death occurring in 1940. The resurgences of 1968 were never further away than then in that ugly moment of European-wide reaction. The Baader Meinhof Group clearly emerged out of the debates and actions of 1968, and individuals who were to become members of the group later undertook an incendiary action in the spring of 1968 – but the group itself, with its violent strategy of urban resistance – was only founded, or issued its manifesto and logo in 1970 and reached its highest point of notoriety or effect under its second generation in the 'hot autumn' of 1977. Benjamin was a figure of the past. But Benjamin was of the same generation as Hitler, three years younger than him, and dying five years before him. The Baader Meinhof Group and associates were famously labelled 'Hitler's Children'.

This paper explores whether they could better be called Benjamin's children. It is not an examination of how Walter Benjamin or the Baader Meinhof Group acted in 1968, because it cannot be – but rather it is a tracing of lines of influence, of connections, intended and oblique, largely theoretical – in order to think about broader questions of modernity, avant gardism and political struggle. What happens in 1968 undoubtedly affects the way in which Benjamin is transmitted to a new generation of readers and activists. Benjamin is rediscovered, pirated, re-read, revolutionised or re-revolutionised. Perhaps this paper is a way of thinking about whether Benjamin became a sorcerer's apprentice, just as did Adorno, though more graphically, according to the prosecutor in the trial against Adorno's doctoral student Hans-Jürgen Krahl after the occupation of Adorno's institute for social research in 1969: in teaching critical theory, said the prosecutor, Adorno had unleashed critical forces he was unable to control. Adorno's retort: 'I established a theoretical mode of thought. How could I have suspected that people would want to implement it with Molotov cocktails?' Did Benjamin lay his own bombs and undermine quite literally his own anti-systemic mode of thought, in the subsequent actions of the Baader Meinhof Group?

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Foto: Bernhard Weber

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